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AUTHOR(S):

Bradshaw, Graham

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Ted Hughes and the Sequential Fallacy

Graham Bradshaw

There is of course no reason why poets should print their poems in their compositional or chronological order, and for many poets the arrangement of a collection is a matter of great importance. W. B. Yeats's *The Tower* begins with a sequence of great poems that actually reverses their compositional order, but that decision makes sense when we see how the dated poems splay out, in different directions, from "Sailing to Byzantium", the poem Yeats places first. To take a more recent and controversial instance: since Philip Larkin always arranged his volumes with great care there are losses, as well as gains, when we read his *High Windows* poems in Anthony Thwaite's collected edition, where Thwaite arranges the poems in their chronological sequence while also including many uncollected poems which Larkin had evidently preferred not to publish. Put simply, we lose the sense of *High Windows* as a *work*. Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* was never a "work" in that sense, since the poems in the original volume were collected and arranged by Ted Hughes after her death. Later, when Hughes prepared the collected edition of Plath's poems and printed the poems in their compositional order, it was fascinating — and even revelatory — to see how often a line or image in one poem generated the next poem.

Hughes's procedure, in publishing his own poems, has been strikingly different. Indeed, that difference even helps us to account for the prolonged critical argument about whether poetic sequences like *Crow* or *Wodwo* are nihilistic. All too often, such arguments blur the distinction between intention and achievement: the alleged point or significance of a poem, within a sequence, sometimes seems disquietingly different from what is actualised or realised in imaginative terms within the poem itself. Hughes contributes to this difficulty through his habit of shifting poems about like counters, as though their original creative significance and meaning can be redetermined by their new position within this or that sequence or subsequence. Then, since the sequences are shaped or determined by that "myth" or "symbolic fable" which Hughes had evolved by the end of the sixties, such reorderings can look like wishful or willful thinking, where the poetic evidence is being brought into line with the "myth."

An example of what is at issue is provided by the three poems which make up the sequence "Gog" in the British edition of *Wodwo* published by Faber in 1967; Parts II and III did not appear in the American edition. Part I is a relatively early poem which was originally published as "God", first in the *Observer* on 16 April 1961, and then in *Nation* six days later — whereas Part II appeared for the first time in *Wodwo*, six years later. Part III has a complicated pre-"Gog" history as "The Knight." This poem was first published in the Spring 1966 issue of *Critical Quarterly*, but was broadcast before that, on 17 October 1965, in the BBC Third Programme series *Poetry Now*. Before reading "The Knight" and "Nightfall" (which was retitled "Ghost Crabs" in *Wodwo*) Hughes described them as "detachable poems" from the play *Difficulties of a Bridegroom*. Keith

Sagar records (presumably on Hughes's authority) that after Plath's death on 11 February 1963 Hughes wrote "The Howling of Wolves" later that month, "Song of a Rat" in March, and "then nothing (except a long play from which 'Ghost Crabs', 'Waking' and Part III of 'Gog' were salvaged) until 1966, when he went to Ireland and started with 'Gnat Psalm' and 'Skylarks'."¹

In other words, the nightmarish Part III originally had a quite different creative context, issuing from an intensely troubled period of bereavement. "The Howling of Wolves" and "Song of a Rat" are among the bleakest poems Hughes has ever written, and in this respect, as in its compositional history, Part III of "Gog" more obviously belongs with them — as "The Knight" — than with the much earlier poem that was originally called "Gog." Similarly, Part I — the original "Gog" — more obviously belongs with earlier poems like "The Perfect Forms" and "Fourth of July" (*Lupercal*), "Logos" (*Wodwo*), and the uncollected "A Fable" (*Times Literary Supplement*, 9 September 1960: 70). Already, there is a question about how differently we should read what were originally independent poems, once they have been brought, or yoked, together in a sequence.

Moreover, the limited information we have on the compositional history of the "Gog" sequence is sharply at odds with Hughes's own account, in his first interview with Ekbert Faas, of how he came to write Part III. Part I had "actually started as a description of the German assault through the Ardennes" but "turned into the dragon in Revelations," Hughes recalls, and this "alarmed me so much I wrote a poem about the Red Cross Knight just to set against it with the idea of keeping it under control ... keeping its effects under control."² This account gives the

misleading impression that Part I and Part III were linked from the first. In another, revealingly different sense Hughes does think of Part I as an independent poem, almost as a creature or child with its own right to exist once it had come into being — for as Hughes tells it, his response to being “alarmed” by the first “Gog” poem was not to revise it, but to write another poem to “set against it” and keep the first “under control”. That casually revealed conception of bringing poems under “control” is revealing about what Hughes is doing, or thinks he can do, in his sequences, when he positions different poems along the trajectory of his “myth” or “symbolic fable.” Readers who are less “alarmed” by Part I than by Part III might rather ask to what extent the “effects” of “The Knight” are being kept “under control” when it takes its new position as the final part of a three-part sequence called “Gog.”

2

David Holbrook shows no interest in these complex critical and contextual issues, and probably nothing could shake or modify his conviction that Part III presents the “dynamics of hate that go with a schizoid response to a schizoid world” — just as he declares that the “Song of a Phallus” in *Crow* shows Hughes “giving himself up to ultimate nullity, a turning against life, in an orgy of nihilistic destructiveness.”³ Nor is the startlingly personal nature of Holbrook’s “diagnosis” in *Lost Bearings in English Poetry* significantly qualified by this half-hearted disclaimer:

It should be clear that in making a schizoid diagnosis I am not saying that an artist is sick or mad: I am saying that he is expressing a characteristically modern problem of self and meaning, to do with weakness of identity,

and sometimes false (hate) solutions based on an inversion of morality arising from the schizoid problem. (115)

Really, this offers a distinction without a difference, since Holbrook's analyses (and amateur psychoanalyses) slide from "poem" to "poet" in an alarmingly confident and naive way. For example, Holbrook declares that the images in the third section of "Gog" are "characteristically [...] fascistic," and that by "identifying with his horseman-hero and his ruthlessness," the "poet" (not the poem) is "turning against the human need for dependence and love. . . In the light of Dasein-analysis he is turning against human meaning" (122).

So, in Holbrook's reading the "motherly weeping" in Part I is also "only explicable in the light of the schizoid diagnosis," while Part II presents a malignant universe since "Ted Hughes will not allow us to redeem the dead Cartesian-Newtonian cosmos" (113). After identifying Hughes's attitude with that of Jeremy Bentham ("All poetry is misrepresentation"), Holbrook observes in disgust:

Hughes's is indeed the universe of modern science, of the Newtonian ideal, which has turned scientific procedure into "a mystic chant over an unintelligible universe." But Hughes makes poetry this kind of futile chant, too: dissociated from the real world as a kind of encapsulated mental rage. (115)

And so, Holbrook concludes, in Part III "we give way to the joys of this kind of hating. This is a characteristic false solution in our time, to the loss of meaning: the dynamics of hate. . ." Nearly forty pages later Holbrook concludes his astonishing attack by objecting to the publication

of such “unjustifiable obscenities”; for this would-be censor, “Such lapses of taste at a high level leave us unable to defend ourselves or ‘the people’ at any level against debasement” (158).

It isn’t difficult to show that Holbrook has misunderstood the point of bringing these three poems together, when he argues that Part III presents “a schizoid response to a schizoid world.” For Hughes himself is offering what might be described as a “diagnosis,” not of a “schizoid world” but of what he sees as schizoid in Western culture or civilization. The terms of his diagnosis exactly correspond with those in a passage near the end of Robert Graves’s *White Goddess*:

The new God claimed to be dominant as Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, pure Holiness, pure Good, pure Logic, able to exist without the aid of woman; but it was natural to identify him with one of the original rivals of the Theme and to ally the woman and the other rivals permanently against him. The outcome was philosophical dualism with all the tragicomic woes attendant on spiritual dichotomy. If the True God, the God of the Logos, was pure thought, pure good, whence came evil and error?⁴

For Hughes as for Graves, one catastrophic consequence of the idealistic attempt to isolate abstract conceptual principles of Good and Evil by identifying “Good” with God as the “Logos” was to separate man from Creation, or Nature. This idea underlies various *Wodwo* poems. In “You Drive in a Circle”, “What is not the World is God”; “Logos” ends, “God is a good fellow, but His mother’s against Him”; and at the end of “Reveille” we see dispossessed Nature becoming the serpent and over-spreading Creation:

out beyond Eden

The black, thickening loops of his body
Glittered in giant loops
Around desert mountains and away
Over the ashes of the future.

The “Gog” sequence starts with the presumptuous cry of God as the Logos: “I am Alpha and Omega.” Each of the three parts concentrates on a different catastrophic effect of that cry or claim.

So, Part I presents the first effect, when a Nature which had slumbered peacefully for ages is demonised and roused to malevolence:

I woke to a shout: ‘I am Alpha and Omega.’
Rocks and a few trees trembled
Deep in their own country...

That presumptuous cry creates and releases the problem of Evil (with its abstracting capital). This problem is, as Hume perceived, peculiarly pressing for the Christian who believes in a God who is, somehow, both benevolent and omnipotent, since the abundant pain and horror which nonetheless fill Creation must be seen, somehow, as an absence or withdrawal of God from material Nature:

...I ran, and an absence bounded beside me.

Another consequence of this perversion of reality is man’s isolation from the rest of Creation: neither beast nor angel, he becomes the hybrid,

straining (like St. Paul) to be released from the body of this death. In this poetic reworking of Graves the demonised Nature is seen not as the serpent but as the fabulous giant Gog, who cannot understand what horrors he commits:

What was my error? My skull has sealed it out. . .

I listen to the song jarring my mouth
Where the skull-rooted teeth are in possession.
I am massive on earth. My footbones beat on the earth
Over the sounds of motherly weeping. . .

In Part II, the catastrophic effect of believing that “What is not the World is God” is that the world which is not God becomes mere spiritless matter:

The grass-head waves day and night and will never know it exists.
The stones are as they were. And the creatures of earth
Are mere rainfall rivulets, in flood or empty paths. . .

The consequent situation of man — now unaccommodated within a Creation which no longer answers to his spiritual needs — is conveyed in an unanswered question, which is perhaps a little too reminiscent of Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”:

Then whose
Are these
Eyes,

eyes and
Dance of wants,
Of offering?

Ironically, although this suggests that what Holbrook calls “the universe of modern science, the Newtonian ideal” is spiritually insufficient, Holbrook was too busy subjecting Hughes to amateur psycho-analysis to see how Hughes’s poem speaks to his own vitalist preoccupations.

The assault on inner and outer nature turns to nightmare in Part III, as the “blood-crossed Knight, the Holy Warrior, hooded with iron” gallops “Out of the wound-gash.” In Hughes’s view, the “subtly apotheosized misogyny of Reformed Christianity is proportionate to the fanatic rejection of Nature, and the result has been to exile man from Mother Nature—from both inner and outer nature. The story of man exiled from Nature is the story of Western Man.”⁵ In his 1970 essay, “Myth and Education,” Hughes similarly observes that the legend of St. George, England’s patron saint, is deeply suspect since it advocates “the complete suppression of the horror”:

It is the symbolic story of Christianity. It’s the key to the neurotic-making dynamics of Christianity. Christianity in suppressing the devil, in fact suppresses imagination and suppresses vital natural life.⁶

At least two of Hughes’s best stories for children, *The Iron Man* and the lovely fable “How the Bee Became,” can be seen as attempts to “correct” this ugly legend.⁷ In its own unlovely way, Part III of “Gog” is providing another such “correction,” by showing how the “spirituality” of

this schizoid St. George is denatured, murderous, and self-destructive. The knight's weapons are those of science and technology — the “compass,” the “gunsight,” “The law and mercy of number” — and are turned against Nature and the feminine: “the fanged grail,” “the womb-wall,” “the root-blood of the origins,” and “the rocking, sinking cradle.” The “rider of iron, on the horse shod with vaginas of iron” gallops “over the womb that makes no claim” to silence that “tireless mouth / Whose cry breaks his sleep” — only to find that this dragon's “coil is under his ribs.” In demonizing Nature, the cry “I am Alpha and Omega” has created both dragon and knight, and the consequence are inevitably self-destructive — save that there can be no end to the destruction and self-mutilation of this “neurotic-making” cultural dynamic until the “evolutionary error” of Western civilization is played out. Hence the use of an iterative present tense: when the poem ends the process is still going on — “Out under the blood-dark archway, gallops bowed the horseman of iron.”

In other words, Holbrook's attack is based on a sustained misreading; to describe the sequence (and Hughes) as “schizoid” and “nihilist” is grotesquely impertinent in both senses, since Hughes himself is attacking what he perceives as the historical, cultural and psychological foundations of the “dynamics of hate.” But here it is instructive to contrast Holbrook's account of the sequence with Keith Sagar's, for if the one critic altogether misunderstands Hughes's intentions the other gives them too much weight.

3

Characteristically, in *The Art of Ted Hughes* Sagar anchors his read-

ing to another Hughesean account of the genesis of the first “Gog” poem, and then reads the whole sequence in these terms, without considering whether the sequence might be less coherent and integrated than his reading supposes. In the 1962 recording, *The Poet Speaks*, Hughes had explained that “Gog” (Part I, that is) began as a poem about the psychology of fascism but “ended by being about the dragon in Revelations that’s waiting under the woman in heaven, beneath the sun and moon, waiting for her to deliver the child with its mouth open.” In the biblical text “the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born” (Revelation, 12: 4); in the poem Gog’s “mouth widens in adoration” when he hears “the Messiah cry.” Sagar therefore assumes that the “motherly weeping” in Part I is that of the “mother who has lost her son to Gog,” and that the “woman as mother” must be, in some sense or aspect, the Goddess (74-75). Similarly, when Part II asks “whose” are these “eyes and / Dance of wants,” Sagar knows that the answer must of course be, the Goddess: “The clue comes in the last line when we are told that all created things are ‘her mirrors’” (75).

Sagar does see some difficulty in identifying “her” as the *same* “weeping mother who has lost her son to Gog,” since that mother was not “dancing” — “Only Gog was dancing.” But then, Sagar reassuringly observes, “Part III gives us some help” by showing how “woman and dragon” are “virtually indistinguishable from one another” (75). The “dragon is incarnation and therefore death and therefore reincarnation to keep the cycle going — Karma,” while the knight “cannot destroy the dragon without destroying life itself” since the “dragon” is the “woman” who is “Woman, woman as mother, as fallen Eve, as Whore of Babylon,

as spurned Venus, as revengeful White Goddess," and is the "real deity of Medieval England," the "Celtic pre-Christian goddess," the "old Mediterranean serpent goddess," the "Anathema of the Old Testament," and the "Queen of Heaven who was the goddess of natural law and love, who was the goddess of all sensation and organic life." This (abbreviated) roll-call might prompt various exasperated questions, like "Who *isn't* she?" or "How *could* the woman who is the dragon in Part III be the same woman as the mother who was weeping because the dragon had eaten her newborn son?"

Unfortunately, Sagar's interest is apostolic and concentrated in the system as revelation. One danger in this kind of "A is really B (and C and D)" exegesis is that of seeing A as no more than B. "Thus," Sagar writes, "the poem is a battle between Gog and woman on the one hand, God and man on the other, exactly the battle described by Graves in *The White Goddess*" (76). But that doesn't suggest why we should value a poem which "exactly" refigures Graves. Because Sagar is so secure in his own sense of Hughes as a "worshipper of Nature," he sees the whole sequence as an integrated, positive expression of Hughes's unchanging concern with that "vital natural life" which Christianity "suppresses." The predominantly negative diagnosis of "neurotic-making dynamics" in Part III is then seen as unproblematically positive, and even curative.

Certainly, the poem isn't that nihilistic hymn of hate which Holbrook reviles in his own hate-filled essay; Holbrook's charge that Hughes is "identifying with his horse-man hero and his ruthlessness" is untenable, since Hughes deplores what the Knight represents. In this sense Holbrook misunderstands the poem's point and Hughes's intention; yet Holbrook is concerned with an imaginative identification, not with the system, where-

as Sagar is too concerned with the system to consider whether the poem's diagnostic drive might indeed be too negative, its imaginative energy too violent and untender, to engage our sense of "vital human nature" in any more than notional way. Unloading a lot of quotations about the Goddess does not refute, or even address, the objection that what the dragon is beyond doubt meant to represent — Nature, and feminine creativity — remains limitingly notional and schematic in the poem. Just as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* might be said to give us too much of Tiresias and too little of the hyacinth girl and whatever possibilities for life she represents, the imaginative energies in Part III of "Gog" are concentrated on the assaulting Knight, while the representative significance of his dragon-victim is barely more than an enabling premise for Hughes's own assault on Western civilization as an "evolutionary error."

The poem in *Crow* which provides the most obvious parallel, in terms of theme and diagnostic intention, prompts similar misgivings. The St. George-figure in "Crow's Account of St. George" is once again presented in obviously hostile terms, as yet another denatured scientific materialist who "sees everything in the Universe / Is a track of numbers racing towards an answer." In this updating of Wordsworth's "We murder to dissect," the scientist "makes a silence," "decreates all," and "picks the gluey heart out of an inaudibly squeaking cell" with "tweezers of number." On being confronted by the demons he has created, he slaughters one after another (it is a long poem) until he finally confronts "a horrible oven of fangs":

He snatches from its mount on the wall a sword,
A ceremonial Japanese decapitator,

And as hacking a path through thicket he scatters
 The lopped segments, the opposition collapses.
 He stands trousered in blood and log-splits
 The lolling body, bifurcates it
 Top to bottom, kicks away the entrails —
 Steps out of the blood-wallow. Recovers —

Drops the sword and runs dumb-faced from the house
 Where his wife and children lie in their blood.

Once again, Sagar's admiring commentary concentrates on the diagnostic intention: we are to understand that this is "civilized man," turning "his heart into a nest of monsters whose shapes he then projects onto those nearest him" and mistaking "the source of vitality and creativeness" for the "opposition" (121-22). Yet the poem's imaginative energies are, once again, concentrated on the horrors, while the "source of vitality and creativeness" remains notional. Sagar brings in Hercules, a Samurai story and Marduk's "brutal slaughter of Tiamat, the mother," yet it seems more instructive to notice how the poem poaches in more familiar territory. "Trousered in blood" is a weak reworking of "breeched in gore" in *Macbeth*, and the log-splitting "bifurcation" recalls the unseaming of Macdonwald; although "top to bottom" is very weak, Hughes can hardly write "from the nave to th'chops" and evidently wants something like that. Yet the horrifying violence of the Shakespearean unseaming is not gratuitous, and looks forward to the final act's revelation about the untimely rips of a Caesarean delivery; Hughes merely stockpiles his horrors, throwing in entrails and blood-wallow in a sensational manner which adds nothing to our understanding of "civilized man."

4

Hughes's tendency to shift poems about like counters, as though giving them a place in a carefully determined sequence can retrospectively redetermine their content and significance, is no less problematic in the large-scale organisation of sequences like *Wodwo* and *Crow*. *Wodwo* is divided into three parts so that, as the "Author's Note" explains,

The stories and the play in this book may be read as notes, appendix and unversified episodes of the events behind the poems, or as chapters of a single adventure to which the poems are commentary and amplification. (9)

Wodwo is probably Hughes's most impressively varied collection, and a creative watershed in his development. But of course we do not have access to that development in the way that we do in reading Hughes's edition of Sylvia Plath's collected poems, where Hughes's decision to print the poems in chronological order brings constant revelations; Hughes covers his own creative tracks as thoroughly as he uncovers Plath's. The ordering of the three parts of *Wodwo* is not chronological, while the invitation to regard them as "chapters in a single adventure" corresponds with the way in which Hughes's mythologising "schema" relates the "adventure" of the Hero to the tripartite process of the shaman's initiation. Again it is instructive to compare the responses of two critics, who both get into difficulties when they take up the invitation to regard *Wodwo* as a "single" unified structure.

In *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, Ekbert Faas writes that, with the "single exception" of "Theology", the *Wodwo* poems were

“all written after the death of Sylvia Plath, and under its impact seem to record the poet’s descent into a Bardo of self-destruction”; something like the shaman’s spiritual journey is in question, since the volume shows how “the broken accents of despair have been retuned by a new curiosity for life” which eventually emerges in the two final poems with their “double note of survival and hope.”⁸ Unfortunately, this account of *Wodwo* as a poet-shaman’s descent, retuning, and emergence is wholly untenable.

To see why, it is enough first to number the poems as they appear in the British edition of *Wodwo*, and then to rearrange the poems in the order of their original publication. There are 21 poems in Part I, and 23 in Part II if the poems in the three-part sequences which did not originally appear as sequences are counted separately.⁹ So, “Thistles,” the first poem in *Wodwo*, was also the first to appear in print, and was broadcast a few weeks before its publication; “Pibroch,” the second poem to appear in print, is placed near the end of *Wodwo* and is counted as poem 40. Wherever a poem was broadcast before it was published I have given the broadcast date. A few poems, like Part II of “Gog,” were neither published nor broadcast before their appearance in *Wodwo*; I have included these in square brackets and guessed (for what that is worth) at their likely place in the rearranged sequence. The sequence then looks like this:

1961

1. THISTLES. Third Programme broadcast, 21 August 1960.
40. PIBROCH. Critical Quarterly, Winter 1960.
22. THEOLOGY. London Magazine, March 1961.
3. HER HUSBAND. Spectator, 24 March 1961.
13. SUGAR LOAF. Observer, 16 April 1961.

- 23. GOG I. Observer, 16 April 1961: "Gog."
- 15. WINO. Observer, 16 April 1961.
- 2. STILL LIFE. New Yorker, 15 July 1961.
- 44. WODWO. New Statesman, 15 September 1961.
- 9. PUBLIC BAR T. V. New Statesman, 28 September 1962.
- 18. THE RESCUE. Observer, 29 October 1961.

1962

- 39. MOUNTAINS. Observer, 5 August 1962.
- 27. OUT I, II, III. Third Programme broadcast, 24 August 1962.
- 14. BOWLED OVER. New Statesman, 28 September 1962.
- 29. THE WARRIORS OF THE NORTH. Observer, 4 November 1962.
- 12. VEGETARIAN. Observer, 4 November 1962.

1963

- 28. NEW MOON IN JANUARY. Observer, 6 January 1963: "Dark Women".
- 20. THE GREEN WOLF. Observer, 6 January 1963.
- 43. FULL MOON AND LITTLE FRIEDA. Observer, 27 January 1963.

[31. SONG OF A RAT I, II, III.]

- 26. KREUTZER SONATA. New Statesman, 23 August 1963.

1964

- 4. CADENZA. New Yorker, 30 May 1964.

1965

- 41. THE HOWLING OF WOLVES. Observer, 10 January 1965.
- 5. GHOST CRABS. Third Programme broadcast, 17 October 1965: "Nightfall".

25. GOG III. Third Programme broadcast, 17 October 1965: "The Knight".

1966

19. STATIONS. Critical Quarterly, Spring 1966.
- [24. GOG II?]
7. LUDWIG'S DEATH-MASK. New Statesman, 17 June 1966: "Death Mask".
16. LOGOS. Critical Quarterly, Summer 1966.
21. THE BEAR. Critical Quarterly, Summer 1966.
42. GNAT-PSALM. Third Programme broadcast, 31 July 1966.
8. SECOND GLANCE AT A JAGUAR. Third Programme broadcast, 31 July 1966.
17. REVEILLE. Critical Quarterly Poetry Supplement Number Seven, 1966.
39. WINGS III. London Magazine, September 1966 ("Einstein Plays Bach").
6. BOOM. New Statesman, 7 October 1966.
34. SKYLARKS. Critical Quarterly, Autumn 1966.
37. WINGS I. New York Review of Books, 3 November 1966.
38. WINGS II. New York Review of Books, 3 November 1966.
30. KARMA. Critical Quarterly, Winter 1966 ("Public Speech")
11. A WIND FLASHES THE GRASS. Critical Quarterly, Winter 1966.
- [32. HEPTONSTALL?]
- [33. BALLAD FROM A FAIRY TALE?]

1967

36. YOU DRIVE IN A CIRCLE. New Yorker, 18 March 1967.

10. FERN. New Yorker, 18 March 1967.

To read the *Wodwo* poems in this order is extremely painful. We might indeed speak of a harrowing descent when we notice how few and how bleak were the poems published in the period from February 1963 through 1965 — until the signs of renewed creative energy in the year or so before *Wodwo* was published on 18 May 1967. But it is obvious enough that Faas's account of the "descent," "retuning," and "recovery" falls apart. The claim that the *Wodwo* poems were "all written after the death of Sylvia Plath," with the "single exception" of "Theology" is demonstrably false. About half the poems in *Wodwo* were already in print before Plath's death on 11 February 1963; moreover, four of the five stories in *Wodwo* were in print by 1960, and really belong to the *Lupercal* period, and the play "The Wound" was broadcast on 1 February 1962. And it is clearly absurd to see Hughes emerging from the "Bardo of self-destruction" in the two last poems in *Wodwo*, when these poems were originally published before Plath's death. It seems curious that Hughes never pointed out these errors; instead, the appearance of *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* in a limited edition jointly signed by Hughes and Faas, the presence of two absorbing interviews, and the use of information supplied by Hughes in the main, critical part of the book, all suggest the critic has the poet's imprimatur.

Leonard Scigaj isn't careless in this way, and at the outset of his account of *Wodwo* in *The Poetry of Ted Hughes* he warns that "Personal biography in the surrealist works of the sixties exists only as an analogue, at a high level of generalization, that influences and parallels, but does not determine, the thought and contents of the poems."¹⁰ Nonetheless, this warning paves the way for another, similar though more

Orientalized, developmental story about "the poet as shaman" (89): "A three-stage surrealistic, heroic adventure, towards a visionary achievement of a healing power, is the central formal pattern underlying the structure of *Wodwo*" (91). To see the three parts of the "single adventure" as a "shamanistic structural progression" is certainly consistent with the various essays and reviews Hughes wrote in the sixties, which show the poet's growing fascination with the shaman's "magic flight" and with the supposedly analogous stages of the Hero-adventure as described in Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*; in this respect the appeal of Scigaj's reading is that it is just what the "Author's Note" to *Wodwo* encourages. Yet this way of making sense of the three parts of *Wodwo* also follows, or doubles, Hughes's own procedure in pulling, or wrenching, individual poems into line with the "single design."

So, for Scigaj, the poems in Part I present a "psychodrama of withdrawal and personality dissolution" (103); in Part II, the five stories "repeat the mythic psychodrama of surrealistic withdrawal and dissolution of the personality" (104), while the radio play *The Wound* also "presents the second stage of the shamanic/heroic 'single adventure' of *Wodwo*, the shaman's experience of dismemberment, or the hero's visit to the underworld" (106). The end of *The Wound*, when Ripley's body is carried back to camp, marks the end of the "voyage to the underworld" in Parts I and II: "The *Wodwo* leitmotif of the dissolution of the conscious Western ego also ends here, allowing the leitmotif of the development of the atman within the self to flower in part III" (107). Finally, the "states of psychological withdrawal" in Parts I and II are succeeded in Part III by "ecstatic moments of participation in nature" (87); "the personae of part III" can at last "look upon life from a newly won position of self-assurance and

self-control, with a calm exercise of judgment" (110). Yet any argument that the poems correspond with this developmental schema seems less plausible, not only when we recall the chronology, but when we consider the evidence of the poems.

For example, having already looked rather closely at the "Gog" sequence, we might well pause over Scigaj's remarkable claim that the "poems placed earlier in the ordering of part III of *Wodwo*...usually articulate positions of self-assurance and self-control from personae exercising calm judgment," and that "Only in 'Gog', 'New Moon in January', and 'Karma' do *personae* express moods of agitation, and in each case the disquiet is resolved, unlike part I [of *Wodwo*], in the individual poems themselves" (114). If we return to "Gog" as our test case, Scigaj's commentary on Part III suggests that he is not reading the poem with sufficient attention. After explaining that it "is a prayer to the unborn child of Revelations 12: 1-5, who is to 'rule all nations with a rod of iron' and cast the dragon Gog from heaven", Scigaj comments:

In section III of "Gog" the persona advises the child to pierce the veil of phenomenality. Whereas Coriolanus relented from conquering Rome at his mother Volumnia's request, the child quester should be even more non-violent; he should pierce with his awakened understanding through the temporal world of *maya* and refrain from acting. He is exhorted rather to follow his weapons toward the light, which in context is an alternative to octopus maw, cradle, and womb wall of maya — perhaps the 'Dharma-Kaya of Clear Light', the state of nirvanic illumination in the Chikkai Bardo. The ending of section III, however, indicates that the child is too blinded by his cultural givens to attain any liberation: his compass is his "lance-blade, the gunsight", and will only result in endlessly recurring cycles of destruction. (116)

So far as Coriolanus is concerned, the relevant lines of the poem suggest that “He” must be more unrelentingly violent than Coriolanus, not “even more nonviolent.” Moreover the “He” in question is the Knight, *not* the unborn child (who figures as another prospective victim of this assault on Nature and the womb). For although the reference of “He” is at first clumsily ambiguous, “his weapons” are to be followed “right through” the “child”:

The unborn child beats on the womb-wall.
He will need to be strong
To follow his weapons towards the light.
Unlike Coriolanus, follow the blades right through Rome

And right through the smile
That is the judge's fury
That is the wailing child...

Nor is it clear why the “persona hopes that this quester” — the “child quester,” in Scigaj’s questionable reading — will “cast the dragon Gog from heaven” (151) and be brought to “the ruled slab, the octaves of order,/The law and mercy of number.” I take it that these references to rule, order, law, and mercy are, like the reference to the “light” in “follow his weapons towards the light”, blackly ironic; Scigaj evidently thinks the contrary, but then his account of the “single design” requires that the “agitation” and “disquiet” in this poem are “resolved” within the poem, that “the persona is in control of his subject matter, exercising firm judgment”, and that “the progression of the three sections” “constitutes a penetration to a higher comprehension of reality based upon an

Eastern model" (p116). One of us is evidently misreading the poem in a thoroughgoing way.

I naturally think it's Scigaj; doubtless he would think it's me, and he reproaches me elsewhere in his book for being "imperceptive" about the "modernist standpoint" (222). The reader must decide; but then what is in question is not merely our flat disagreement over how one particular difficult poem is to be understood, but the credibility of that developmental model which Scigaj takes over from Hughes himself. For if we think the idea of a "shamanistic structural progression" is being imposed on the poems by the poet as well as the critic, we need a different model or account of whatever development takes place in these poems. What seems an advantage in Scigaj's account — namely, that it keeps so close to Hughes's own "concept of the poet as shaman" — is then a disadvantage.

For example, Scigaj supposes, like virtually all of the critics who write on *Wodwo*, that the poems provide evidence of a painful personal and creative crisis. And, although Scigaj maintains that "personal biography" exists "only as an analogue, at a high level of generalization, that influences and parallels, but does not determine, the thought and content of the poems," he argues that the "surrealist works of the sixties" show how, "as Hughes abandons formalism, the emotional content of his-private experience surfaces more directly in his poetry" (86). So, when he refers to "oblique references and analogous moods in the torment of 'Song of a Rat'" (86), Scigaj assumes — again, like virtually every critic of *Wodwo* — that the indications of crisis in *Wodwo* were (here I had better use scare-quotes) "linked" to the personal and creative crisis in the period after Hughes's separation from Plath in August 1962 and her

death the following February. That assumption is not unreasonable or implausible, although it might lead, and has led, to quite different accounts and valuations. Listing the poems in the order of their first publication starkly confirms that there was a personal and creative crisis, and that “Gog III” and “Song of a Rat” are among the very few poems Hughes wrote in this period. Yet that “link” is first obscured by Hughes’s own ordering of the poems, and then effectively severed in Scigaj’s account of the relevant poems in Part III. Just as Scigaj cites “Gog III” as an example of the way in which individual poems “resolve” the “tensions” which could not be resolved in Part I and Part II of *Wodwo*, he discovers a reassuring progress toward “atman illumination” in “Song of a Rat,” once the dying rat “has freed himself by trusting to inner powers and self-reliance” (p117). In other words, Scigaj is wrenching the individual poems into accordance with his idea of a sequential progress toward “a newly won position of self-assurance and self-control.” He would be on firmer ground when he observes that “Mountains,” “Full Moon and Little Frieda,” and “Wodwo” all “view nature with a new beatitude of spirit transfigured by a newly won sense of freedom”—were it not that these poems were all published much earlier, and before Plath’s death. Such references to the “new” or “newly won” are in this context thoroughly misleading, and follow from the eagerness with which Scigaj embraces the idea of a “shamanistic structural progression.”

That idea would seem more obviously imposed on the poems, with their contrary creative evidence, if Hughes had published his poems, like Plath’s, in their chronological order. *Wodwo* is very much a *work*, but in a problematic and even dangerous sense. For the basic problem, and the

source of what I have called the “sequential fallacy,” is that the larger formal organisation is being imposed from without on poems with their own independently achieved life and meaning — first by Hughes, and then by critics who make Hughes’s systematic reordering the basis of their readings, instead of questioning the assumptive basis of Hughes’s “myth” or “system.” The sequence is determined by the idea of a “single adventure,” which is in turn determined by the mythic “system,” so that the “system” works to readjust or redetermine the significance of the poems. Then, because the poems include some of the finest Hughes has written, their compelling power and authority adds weight to the idea of a “single adventure,” and the ordering makes the “system” itself seem more plausible and imposing — but only if we do not notice, or care, that the “newly won” position at the end of *Wodwo* actually involves a return to poems written years earlier than the most disturbed and disturbing poems in the volume. The alternative course — which involves a radical disagreement with Hughes as well as his critics — is to trust the evidence of the poems, and to abandon the developmental model of a “single adventure” or “shamanistic structural progression” whenever it distorts that poetic evidence.

In one sense this is undeniably damaging to our sense of *Wodwo* as a “work”, since the mythic system is so important to Hughes and his more apostolic critics, and dictates the structural organisation of *Wodwo* and later sequences. But “dictates” also suggests the danger of allowing exegesis to displace criticism — and there is another, more positive sense in which rejecting the system might allow us to reclaim, and reappraise, some of the most remarkable poems to be written in our century. Here too Yeats provides an instructive parallel, if we refuse to shackle our

sense of his poetic achievement to the “system” in *A Vision*. Or we could take a larger view, since most of the literature in English we read and admire is rooted in beliefs or assumptions—usually Christian or Graeco-Roman—we can no longer share: just what kind of imaginative engagement is possible and proper in these circumstances is one of the most important and least discussed problems of literary criticism.

¹ Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd. edition, enlarged, 1975), p. 61.

² Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 61; Hughes’s ellipses.

³ David Holbrook, *Lost Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Vision Press, 1977), p. 115.

⁴ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber, 1971), p. 465.

⁵ Ted Hughes, “The Environmental Revolution”, in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* (London: Faber, 1994), p. 129; originally published in *Your Environment 1* (Summer, 1970.)

⁶ Ted Hughes, “Myth and Education”, *Children’s Literature in Education 1* (1970), p. 66.

⁷ See Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 230, for a helpful commentary.

⁸ Faas, p. 92.

⁹ The exemplary bibliography in Sagar’s *The Art of Ted Hughes* provides details of first publication dates.

¹⁰ Leonard Scigaj, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1986), p. 87.